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AUTHOR Clarkson, William M.
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ABSTRACT

If Chicano children do not learn an alternative to their home dialect, the local Spanish with its heavy overlay of English will become the standard for bilingual Chicano youngsters. The Spanish language itself may soon be another cultural relic for many Spanish surnamed people in the United States. Bilingual education represents the obvious antidote to prevent this language loss, but its present state does not warrant optimism. Many bilingual teachers speak only the vernacular and have little training in Spanish grammar and orthography; the teaching materials they use may ignore universally accepted standards of the Spanish language. Some linguists and educators advocate accepting the dialect the child brings to school without disturbing, correcting, or tampering with it in any way. Such attitudes guarantee a second class education for those students falling under this "anything goes" philosophy. The Spanish needs of Chicano youngsters tend to be the fundamentals: orthography, basic grammar, improved reading skills, vocabulary building, recognition of anglicisms, etc. Many bilingual programs are ill-prepared to provide these basic language learning skills; poorly trained teachers who labor with inferior educational materials cannot impart satisfactory competence in Spanish language skills. These trends and attitudes must be reversed if bilingual education is to succeed and if Spanish is to remain a viable language in the Southwest. (DS)

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Spanish in the Bilingual Classroom:

Beyond the Standard/Vernacular Dilemma

William M. Clarkson

San Antonio College

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SPANISH IN THE BILINGUAL CLASSROOM:
BEYOND THE STANDARD/VERNACULAR DILEMMA

If Chicano children do not learn an alternative model to the vernacular, the local Spanish with its heavy overlay of English will become the standard for bilingual Chicano youngsters. Unlike the adult Spanish speaker whose language performance may or may not receive direct interference from English, for the child, "these constructions become his model upon which to expand -- as native patterns."¹ If Chicano youngsters cultivate only their home dialect and are not exposed to a standard form, the Spanish language itself, in whatever form, may soon be another cultural relic for large numbers of Spanish surnamed people in the United States. It already is for many. A. Bruce Gaarder, founder of the Liga Nacional Defensora del Idioma Español, has stated: "Los partidarios del 'pocho' y 'los pochimos' (el empleo en una frase esencialmente en español, de elementos fonológicos, sintácticos o léxicos tomados del inglés) no se dan cuenta de que están facilitando la sustitución completa del español por el inglés."²

Bilingual education and its objective of literacy in both languages represents the obvious antidote to prevent the eventuality of this language loss. Unfortunately, the present state of bilingual education does not warrant such optimism. The principal shortcomings of many bilingual programs regarding the Spanish language preparation of Chicano children originate from unsatisfactory learning materials and from poorly trained teachers. The question of poorly trained bilingual teachers

is not simply a matter of ineffectively designed bilingual teacher training programs. The problem is more serious since its rationale can be attributed in large measure to certain well-known trends in contemporary linguistic thought.

Just as they have defended black English as a legitimate standard form in its own right, permissive linguists and educators have also supported Chicano Spanish. Proponents of the vernacular point out that the Chicano language often exhibits linguistic patterns which are more logical than the standard Spanish from which they deviate. They note as one example, the tendency to regularize the pattern of stem accentuation and conjugation of the present subjunctive which produces such forms as "háblemos" (hablemos), "cómamos" (comamos), "vuélvamos" (volvamos), "puédamos" (podamos), etc.³ The English "goed," "runned," and "buyed" are more "logical" than the standard "went," "ran," and "bought." Most would agree, however, that the former are developmental features (baby talk) and are appropriate speech for the very young but definitely inappropriate for literate adults, not to mention classroom teachers. It is often argued that each dialect of a language is "just as valid and effective as another, regardless of the social judgments" (García, p. 70). The unwary teacher who might consider correcting the child's language must "accept the Spanish dialect that a Spanish-speaking Chicano brings with him to school. This dialect is so precious that it should not be disturbed, corrected, or tampered with in any way by language teachers, especially by those who are responsible

for teaching the Spanish language" (García, p. 74).

Linguistic attitudes of this sort faintly camouflage a patronizing spirit and guarantee a second class education for those students who fall under the guidance of practitioners of this "anything goes" language philosophy. The teacher who leaves the child linguistically where he found him is not a teacher, at least not a language teacher. Defenders of such linguistic permissiveness confuse linguistic efficiency with the difficult task of correcting and refining the child's language. It is a linguistic truism that as a means of communication every dialect is as valid and as effective as another. However, this does not imply that a hierarchy of language forms is arbitrary. One doesn't apply this yardstick to music, the plastic arts, the theatre or any other communication skill or form. A teacher does not accept a child's initial attempts at painting, for example, without suggesting ways in which he might improve his next creation. This is the teacher's obligation, the stuff of teaching, and it also applies to the child's language skills. Since these indulgent linguistic notions emanate from prestigious centers of learning and from the minds of experts in the field, it is not surprising that teachers are confused about how and if they should try to formalize the teaching of Spanish to Chicano youngsters. These linguistic inclinations also have serious implications with respect to the kind of language training required for the bilingual teacher, especially the Chicano teacher.⁴ A permissive language philosophy encourages those in charge of directing

university bilingual teacher training programs to consider a Chicano teacher's working knowledge of the vernacular to be sufficient language preparation.⁵

A Chicano elementary school teacher recently confessed to me his uneasiness with the presence of Mexican children in his bilingual classroom who had received their first years of formal education in Mexico. The source of his uneasiness was the children's superior command of standard Spanish. The students were better prepared than the teacher! Chicano teachers are not responsible for this regrettable situation. Many, because of their surname, were shanghaied out of their regular classrooms and given new, permanent assignments in bilingual classrooms. These teachers never pretended to possess academic skills in standard Spanish or even the ability to write their dialect in accordance with standard Spanish orthography. More distressing and less excusable, however, are the Chicano teachers who are graduating from university bilingual teacher training programs with evidence of course work in linguistics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics but who are virtually unfamiliar with the basic rules of Spanish grammar and orthography.

The quality of the Spanish of locally prepared bilingual materials even though these are researched with the aid of generous government grants at times leaves much to be desired. One well known K-2 reading program, for example, labels its Spanish language readers "lectores" instead of the standard "libros de lectura."⁶ A text designed to commemorate events

of cultural value to Mexican Americans contains the following randomly selected passages: . . . ya va ser la hora de comer . . . Póngame también corazones. . . que por ir con ancia. . . se coje de la mano. . . Burlarás a nadie. . .⁷ Such deviations from the standard cannot be dismissed as legitimate variants of the Southwest dialect. The use of "lector" rather than "libro de lectura" is a linguistic calque, most likely the result of deficient dictionary skills. The author merely chose the first entry in the dictionary under "reader" without consideration of the actual meaning of the Spanish word. Spanish language errors cited from the second text include basic grammar mistakes (omission of "a" after "va"), faulty orthography ("coje, ancia"), misuse of accent marks ("Póngame"), and the curious construction "Burlarás a nadie" ("No te burlarás de nadie"). Regrettably, these examples are not unique but are representative of a certain kind of government subsidized, semi-commercial educational commodity which is presently being produced for use in bilingual programs. It is truly astonishing that so many of those responsible for the development of bilingual materials contemptuously ignore the universally accepted standards of the Spanish language. This foolish penchant seriously imperils the future of bilingual education at a moment when it is indeed vulnerable.⁸ The Spanish language needs of Chicano youngsters as well as most adults tend to be the fundamentals: orthography, including the use of accent marks, basic grammar, improved reading skills, vocabulary building, recognition of anglicisms, etc. As the

preceding indicates, many bilingual programs are ill-prepared to impart these basic language learning skills. The rhetoric of educators and linguists on the exaggerated virtues of the vernacular promotes functional illiteracy and not true bilingualism. Similarly, poorly trained teachers who labor with inferior educational materials cannot provide their students with instruction on a level that produces satisfactory competence in Spanish language skills. These trends and attitudes must be reversed if bilingual education is to succeed and if Spanish is to remain a viable language in the Southwest.⁹ Ultimately, the formal language training of Chicanos in Spanish is as significant for the survival of Spanish in this area as the informal, oral usage of the language in the conduct of daily activities.

NOTES

¹Joseph A. Matluck and Betty J. Mace, "Language Characteristics of Mexican-American Children: Implications for Assessment," Journal of School Psychology, XI (Winter, 1973), 371.

²A. Bruce Gaarder, "La centralita del idioma español común," NABE, I (May, 1976), 53.

³Ernest García, "Chicano Spanish Dialects and Education," Aztlán, II (Spring, 1971), 71.

⁴For a discussion of the tendency of university bilingual teacher training programs to accept a Chicano's working knowledge of the vernacular as sufficient Spanish language preparation, see my article "The Vernacular Vs. Standard Spanish in the Bilingual Classroom: Implications for Teacher Training Programs for Chicanos" Hispania, LX (December, 1977), 965-967.

⁵Of course the inadequate Spanish language preparation of Chicano bilingual teachers is not solely a matter of an academic exaltation of the vernacular at the expense of the standard. Administrative ignorance and lack of concern on the part of public school officials, the use of deficient tests to determine the teacher's Spanish language abilities, university Spanish language classes not designed to meet the needs of the Chicano student, the defensive attitudes of Chicano political activists regarding Chicano Spanish, together with other well known factors all help create the lamentable situation which exists today in too many bilingual classrooms. However, the problem remains essentially a pedagogical one. In this respect, such linguistic notions as those criticized in this paper have contributed considerably to the formulation of the present laissez faire attitude toward the need for formal training in Spanish for Chicano bilingual teachers. Moreover, as noted above, this linguistic philosophy often provides the rationale or justification for neglecting the Chicano teacher's formal training in Spanish.

⁶BOLAR, by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (Austin, 1973).

⁷Presentaciones Escolares, by Curriculum Adaptation Network for Bilingual/Bicultural Education (Austin: Dissemination Center for Bilingual Bicultural Education, 1974), pp. 25, 41, 34, 45, 54.

⁸It would be misleading for me to attempt to create the impression that all locally prepared, semi-commercial bilingual materials neglect the standards of written Spanish. However, it is a serious and inexcusable problem and should be eliminated. In many cases, the remedy is simple. For example, such errors as those cited from Presentaciones Escolares could have been avoided with the aid of a proofreader familiar with the rules of Spanish grammar and orthography.

⁹For an excellent discussion of the eventual maintenance or displacement of Spanish in the United States, see A. Bruce Gaarder, "El mantenimiento o desplazamiento lingüístico: el futuro del español en los Estados Unidos," NABE I (December, 1976), 25-45.